

Las herramientas imposibles: una reestructuración de la
clasificación de objetos técnicos de R. Dipert

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Abstract: This article pursues a twofold objective. First, it analyzes the shortcomings of R. Dipert's classification of technical objects. Specifically, I will focus on explicating the way artificiality is detected, the problem of the polyvalence of the notion of 'property,' and the question of how types of artefactual communicativity are classified. This approach aims to show that the category of 'tool' is unnecessary, since it is impossible to find a tool that is not already an artifact. As a second objective, I seek to propose a cautious stratification of the various levels of communicativity that appear intertwined in Dipert's proposal.

Keywords: Tool, Artifact, Communicativity, Dipert.

Resumen: Este artículo se propone un doble objetivo: en primer lugar, analizar las insuficiencias de la clasificación de objetos técnicos de R. Dipert. Específicamente, me concentraré en la explicitación del modo en que se detecta la artificialidad, el problema de la polivalencia de la noción de "propiedad" y la cuestión de cómo se clasifican los tipos de comunicatividad artefactual. Esta aproximación busca mostrar que la categoría de "herramienta" resulta innecesaria, puesto que es imposible encontrar una herramienta que no sea ya un artefacto. Como segundo objetivo, busco proponer una prudente estratificación de los diversos niveles de comunicatividad que aparecen entremezclados en la propuesta de Dipert.

Palabras clave: Herramienta, Artefacto, Comunicatividad, Dipert.

Notas de autor

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Luciano Mascaró holds a PhD in Philosophy from the University of Buenos Aires. He works as Associate Researcher at CONICET. His area of specialization is the philosophy of technology. He received a Fulbright scholarship for postdoctoral studies at the State University of New York (SUNY). He has taught doctoral seminars and led research groups. He is a full professor of Metaphysics (UCES); associate professor of Philosophy of Language (UCA); associate professor in charge of Philosophy of Nature (USAL); and assistant professor in Philosophical Anthropology (UBA). He has published numerous articles and book chapters on topics related to the philosophy of technology.

1. Introduction

In 1995, the American philosopher Randall R. Dipert published an article titled *Some Issues in the Theory of Artifacts: Defining “Artifact” and Related Notions*. According to the author himself, the article compiles and expands upon several issues analyzed in his book *Artifacts, Artworks, and Agency*. In that paper, Dipert aims to distinguish three notions that are frequently confused: artifacts, instruments, and tools. The text has become canonical in introductory readings in the philosophy of technology, since it deals with key concepts in this field. Although some of these notions have grown outdated and somewhat detached from contemporary debates, it remains true that numerous studies concerning the communicative dimension of technical objects continue to return to Dipert as an unavoidable point of reference.

In what follows, I shall present a series of criticisms of Dipert’s position which do not arise from confronting it with another philosophical system, but rather from tensions that emerge within his own proposals. At the same time, I will attempt to outline an alternative—perhaps closer to current discussions—that both updates and complements Dipert’s framework.

For this purpose, I will focus on three main topics: the explanation of how artificiality is detected; the problem of the polyvalence of the notion of property; and the issue of how to classify the types of communication associated with artifacts.

As I progress in my argumentation, it will become apparent to the reader that my notion of communicativity is quite broad. Ranging from an object’s ability to make a user aware of its practical possibilities to its capacity for allowing us to acquire information about the surrounding world. This inclusive notion is to be understood as an aspect of an object’s agency related to making a state of things accessible for others. As opposed to Dipert’s account, I do not think that objects should be grouped together depending on whether they do or do not communicate (whether or not they have communicative properties). This position would fall into the Taxonomic fallacy (Harman, 2011, p. 119) of assuming that categories or groups of characteristics should be identified with groups of beings. I believe that every entity makes some state of things available one way or another. The technical scene is not divided between those objects that communicate and those that don’t. Rather, there are modes of communicating that overlap and become active or dormant in different moments and situations. Communicativity is not a property but a position in which an object is placed.

2. The Detection of Artificiality

2.a The Artificiality of Instruments

I begin with a very brief description of Dipert’s conception of the three types of technical object. First, instruments are entities in which one detects potentialities or affordances to be applied to a task (means toward an end). In the discovery of an instrument, it is irrelevant whether it is actually applied to the corresponding purpose, or whether the detected potentiality is in fact present in the object. This means that an instrument may be merely observed or conjectured.

A question arises that Dipert does not explicitly answer: how are an object's affordances detected? If we rely on the illustrative cases he provides—such as the “looking durable” (Dipert, 1995, p. 128) of a hammer, or the deliberateness of a marble statue's figure—we understand that affordances are primarily detected through a simple act of perception. Yet, as Dipert himself indicates, invoking a phenomenological background, every act of perception has an active and constructive character. Every act of observation is embedded in, and nourished by, a horizon of sedimented experience, while simultaneously constituting the material for future perceptions. The potentialities and characteristics of objects—their applicability—arise from a perception grounded in pre-theoretical understanding of the empirical overall style of the world (Husserl, 1970, p. 31).

The observation of a pointed branch on the ground can lead a habituated observer to perceive the capacity of that object to penetrate a relatively resistant surface. The user may or may not employ this object; may or may not recognize its usefulness for some process; and, of course, may err in detecting a potentiality. The crucial issue here lies in the problem of artificiality. At the level of instruments, affordances are detected by a perceptual conjecture based on sedimented experience. The object may later be put to use for some end. Yet in this case no explicit activity is carried out to modify the object in order to make it more efficient for a task—that is, artificiality has not yet emerged. The only human intervention consists in the application of a found object. Even if the object is not used at all, we might still say we have discovered an instrument. We are thus dealing with the simple detection of the beneficial potential of something. This means that the instrument constitutes a mode of seeing, a mere activation principle that identifies a potentiality.

This leads us to a network of objects that could be called “instruments,” but in which technicality seems to enter into crisis—or, more precisely, in which the notion of use itself becomes problematic. For instance, a person may “benefit” from the shadow of a tree, or sow crops on the rainy side of a mountain, thus entrusting their planting to the beneficial potential of rainfall that has not yet even occurred. If an instrument is the conjecture about the usefulness of something for an end (without even requiring its actual use), we could then claim that the full moon or a strong wind may be considered instruments. In these cases, no artificiality is detected at all. But the scheme becomes even more complicated when we attend to Dipert's assertion that events too may count as technical objects. In this sense, we could affirm that a social uprising or a mathematical theorem constitutes an instrument, insofar as its usefulness for a given end can be detected by an interpreter. The conclusion would be that non-artificial instruments exist—or, alternatively, that artificiality itself is a kind of discovering gaze.

2.b The Artificiality of Tools

A tool is an instrument whose structure has been altered by an intentional agent so as to make it more efficient for the task for which it was perceived as beneficial. In other words, a tool is an intentionally modified object. This means that the key to toolhood lies in the detection of artificiality. Of course, such artificiality is grasped in the mode of conjecture. Numerous examples show us how an object that appears artificial may not be (such as geological formations like the Giant's Causeway, which seem to have been designed by a human engineer), and conversely, how an object that appears organic may in fact be artificial (as in Henrique Oliveira's seemingly organic wooden sculptures).

Now, since the key to toolhood lies in the detection of human intervention, we must again ask: by what means is artificiality detected? A first-person phenomenological reflection shows that the intentionally modified character of an object is also apprehended through perception—just as the usefulness of instruments is—but in this case, perception attends not only to the figure and affordances of the object as grasped through habitual experience and the world's style but also to more subtle and complex elements. The following may be considered perceptual indicators of artificiality: a) The symmetry or regularity of the object's shape; b) The unlikely manner in which materials are combined; c) the detail of its finishing, and the presence of elements that may be deemed ornamental; d) the context in which it appears—that is, the possible artificial ecology to which it belongs and within which it acquires meaning. Ultimately, artificiality may be observed by conjecturing about the probability of occurrence (in Shannon's sense of entropy) of the material combinations and structure of a given object. If a spontaneous combination of those materials seems highly improbable (that is, low entropy), the likelihood that the object is artificial increases. Still, no a priori certainty about an object's artificiality can ever be achieved.

The fundamental problem in characterizing tools lies in detecting which property has been modified. Dipert's account offers a broad and somewhat disorganized catalog of what details of an object might constitute tool properties. Among these we find aesthetic properties, nutritional properties, shelter properties, social properties, symbolic properties, and “useful or desirable” properties (Dipert, 1995, p. 124). If the detection of any of these—each with its inherent ambiguity—can serve as an index of toolhood, then practically any object (or event, or act) could count as a tool, which significantly weakens the very category itself.

2.c The Artificiality of Artifacts

In Dipert's framework, artifacts are characterized by communicativity. That is, they are tools possessing two sets of properties: one associated with practical operations aimed at goals (the so-called tool properties), and another set meant to make those tool properties visible or noticeable—these are the communicative properties.

Here we encounter the most complex difficulty in Dipert's account: if the communicative property is meant to indicate the presence of tool properties, this indicative function can be fulfilled in many ways—for instance, through a bright color, a luxurious material, an inscription showing how to use it, a decorative motif, a word or symbol inscribed on the surface, etc. But the very shape of an object may also indicate that its properties have been modified to increase efficiency. For example, the sharp form of a knife announces an artificial enhancement of its cutting capacity. Similarly, the perceptible durability of a hammer's materials (which entails the possibility of striking firm surfaces) simultaneously constitutes a property indicative of that same durability—a feature Dipert expresses as “looking durable.”

The problem with such examples is that the tool property (e.g., “being durable” or “being sharp”) is the very same property that communicates the presence of affordances (“looking durable” or “looking sharp”). Dipert himself acknowledges that tool properties and communicative properties may coincide. This assertion entails a series of consequences that endanger the stability of his entire classification.

3. Artificiality and Communicativity

The line of reasoning that threatens Dipert's classifications can be expressed in the following three points:

1. Every tool property (e.g., “being durable”) is perceptible in some way (e.g., “looking durable”); otherwise, how could we know that the property is present?
2. A property that is perceptible thereby communicates its presence.
3. Consequently, all tool properties are, at the same time, communicative properties of toolhood (“tool-communicating properties”, in Dipert’s terms).

This means that communicative properties and tool properties not only may coincide, as Dipert claims, but must coincide in all cases. In other words, every tool property is simultaneously a communicative property. Could we even imagine a “pure” tool property—that is, one that does not also announce its own presence? I believe such “pure” properties do not exist.

If this is the case, and if, as we have seen, tools are characterized by the isolated presence of productive properties, then tools become impossible. There are no tools whose properties are not, at the same time, communicative. That is, there are no tools that are not already artifacts. The category of tools becomes unnecessary, since artifacts can account for all their characteristics—and for many additional ones as well. Dipert’s tools are, in reality, artifacts whose communicative phase remains relatively simple and is associated solely with the indication of productive properties.

Hence, the classification should consist of the following two strata: 1) Instruments, as entities in which the usefulness for a task is detected, but which are not modified in order to enhance efficiency; 2) Artifacts, as entities whose useful properties have been altered to increase efficiency and, in that very act, have become communicative (to varying degrees) of their presence and artificiality.

This does not preclude the capacity of artifacts to communicate other details beyond the presence of tool properties—as Dipert confusingly suggests when he mentions aesthetic, social, or symbolic properties, among others.

Ultimately, however, even the detection of the affordances of instruments is, in a certain sense, a mode of communicativity, for we could not grasp any beneficial potential if it were not somehow communicated to us. Everything said thus far suggests that communicativity pervades all levels of technical objects. Either communicativity is not exclusive to artifacts, or all technical objects are, in fact, artifacts.

4. Toward a Stratification of Communicativity

We are faced with a framework in which communicativity appears—albeit in diverse ways—at all levels of technical objects. Yet an interpretation that affirms the universal communicativity of technical entities without attending to the subtleties of this communication would be neither informative nor satisfying. How, then, can this amalgam of undifferentiated communicativities be resolved? I will now present two possible ways out of this difficulty: the first suggested by Dipert, the second by myself.

Dipert notes that, in cases where communicative and tool properties coincide (though, as we have seen, this happens in all cases), we are actually dealing with two functions of the same property. This proposal would require us to break down the variety of possible functions for each property—a task that would not only prove interminable but for which Dipert offers no methods.

For example, if we take the property “being sharp” in a knife, that property could fulfill an innumerable variety of functions, if by “function” we mean the employment of a property in the service of a human goal. Thus, “being sharp” could serve the obvious function of cutting, but also carving or engraving wood, digging or uprooting a plant, even serving as an anchor or support if stuck into a firm surface—and the list could go on. Clearly, digging, anchoring, carving, and cutting are not identical tasks; each involves specific embodiment relations and environmental interaction not reducible to a single type.

Now, if we also consider that there should exist another set of functions distinct from those—functions aimed at communicating each of these ends—the list would grow exponentially. It would even include further functions not directly related to the physical affordances of the knife's blade, but to its communicative dimension: for instance, serving as a sign of threat, or as a symbolic indicator of power within a family crest.

Faced with this unsatisfactory outcome, my proposal is as follows: I suggest suspending the tripartite classification altogether and accepting that communicativity is inherent in everything artificial—not only in artifacts. Therefore, our effort should be directed toward establishing a careful stratification of the levels of communicativity. What follows is only a sketch of a complex task that must be undertaken in greater detail in the future. I hope this classification can account for both the most basic and the most specific levels. For this purpose, it will be essential to introduce a distinction between the notions of content and referent.

By referent I mean that about which an object provides an indication, and by content I mean the aspect of the referent that the object highlights or makes available. By “indication” I mean the making-available of a state of affairs to an interpreter. This classification takes into account only the communication between objects and humans, not communication between objects and objects. Needless to say, the levels may overlap, but this does not mean that the nuances they reveal are negligible.

4.a Regarding the referent:

1. **Self-referential indication.** An object may indicate something about itself or some aspect of itself—for example, a door whose handle reads “push,” or a knife whose shape and arrangement of parts indicate where it should be held.
2. **Hetero-referential indication.** An object may indicate something distinct from itself—for example, a thermometer that makes the ambient temperature available, or a weather vane that indicates wind direction.

4.b Regarding the content:

The “what” of indications is the aspect of Dipert's classification where the greatest confusion arises, mainly because aspects belonging to the referent are mixed with others belonging to the content, and vice versa. I propose a stratification of possible contents which, without pretending to be exhaustive, seeks to locate and organize Dipert's various claims about communicative properties. All these levels may overlap—that is, several kinds of communicativity may be active in an object at once.

1. **Property.** Every object (artificial or not) communicates its affordances to a mind shaped by sedimented experience, simply by being present in the world and perceptually accessible. An example would be a rock discovered on the ground in which we detect the capacity to strike. This level corresponds to Dipert's category of instruments but also extends to any indication of tool or communicative property—for example, the indication that an object can make ink marks on paper.
2. **Artificiality.** Every artificial object communicates the fact that it has been modified to make its affordances more effective—that is, every artificial object communicates its own artificiality. This communicativity is self-referential; its content is the intentionally altered character of the object's structure. This level would account for Dipert's tools, though, as we have seen, that category becomes unnecessary in his system.

3. **Function.** An object may indicate the purpose for which it is designed—for instance, a chair, by its very shape, may indicate that it is meant for someone to sit on.
4. **Operation.** Not be confused with function. Operation is not necessarily goal-oriented; it concerns the movement or interrelation of parts—for example, a paper guillotine indicates, by the arrangement of its pieces, which part should remain fixed, where the paper should be placed, and which component moves and in what direction.
5. **Symbolic dimension.** An object may indicate the place it occupies within a complex system of meanings difficult to formalize—for instance, a gold watch that signals the social status of its owner, or a bike rack or bowls of water for dogs at a store entrance that signal a certain ecological concern appealing to a specific demographic.
6. **Origin or state.** An object may indicate the condition in which it currently finds itself—for example, a “low battery” warning on a calculator’s display—or its provenance, such as a label reading “Juan’s scissors,” a souvenir whose shape or imagery indicates it comes from Paris, or Dipert’s own example of the brand name “Acme” inscribed on a tool’s surface.
7. **Behavior.** An object may indicate the actions or attitudes that users should adopt—for example, a sign reading “place your order here,” or a sock tied to a doorknob signaling that passersby should refrain from entering.
8. **Causal world or state of affairs.** An object may indicate an aspect of the surrounding world—such as a dial showing the temperature inside a boiler—or a situation in which it itself is involved, like a speedometer showing how fast a vehicle is moving, or a red light indicating that a restroom is occupied.

Numerous additional aspects of communicativity could be distinguished to bring greater clarity and structure to Dipert’s distinctions—for instance, differentiating between causal and non-causal sources of content; the presence or absence of inscriptions such as arrows, letters, or ornaments, and their relative importance within the object’s structure; or the degree of isomorphism between the information conveyed and that which could (or could not) be obtained without the object’s mediation. Additionally, this line of inquiry would benefit greatly from a clarification of the types of reading experiences that users may have and the role of hermeneutic interfaces in that relationship (Parente & Mascaró, 2024). This list is not exhaustive, but it accounts for Dipert’s mixed classifications and several others, ordering them in a coherent manner.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of Dipert’s taxonomy reveals a fundamental ambiguity at the heart of his distinction between instruments, tools, and artifacts. If every property that contributes to efficiency must be perceptible in order to be recognized, then it necessarily communicates its presence. In that case, no tool property can be purely non-communicative, and every tool is already an artifact. This realization compels a restructuring of the entire schema.

Furthermore, communicativity is not an optional or secondary trait but the very condition under which artificiality becomes visible and intelligible. As far as they are related to humans, all artificial objects, in manifesting their altered nature, also signify. The task at hand, then, is not to isolate classes of objects but to stratify the degrees and modalities of this communicativity—from the basic perception of affordances to complex symbolic functions. By doing so, we move beyond Dipert’s rigid taxonomy toward a dynamic understanding of technology as a communicative field.

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